

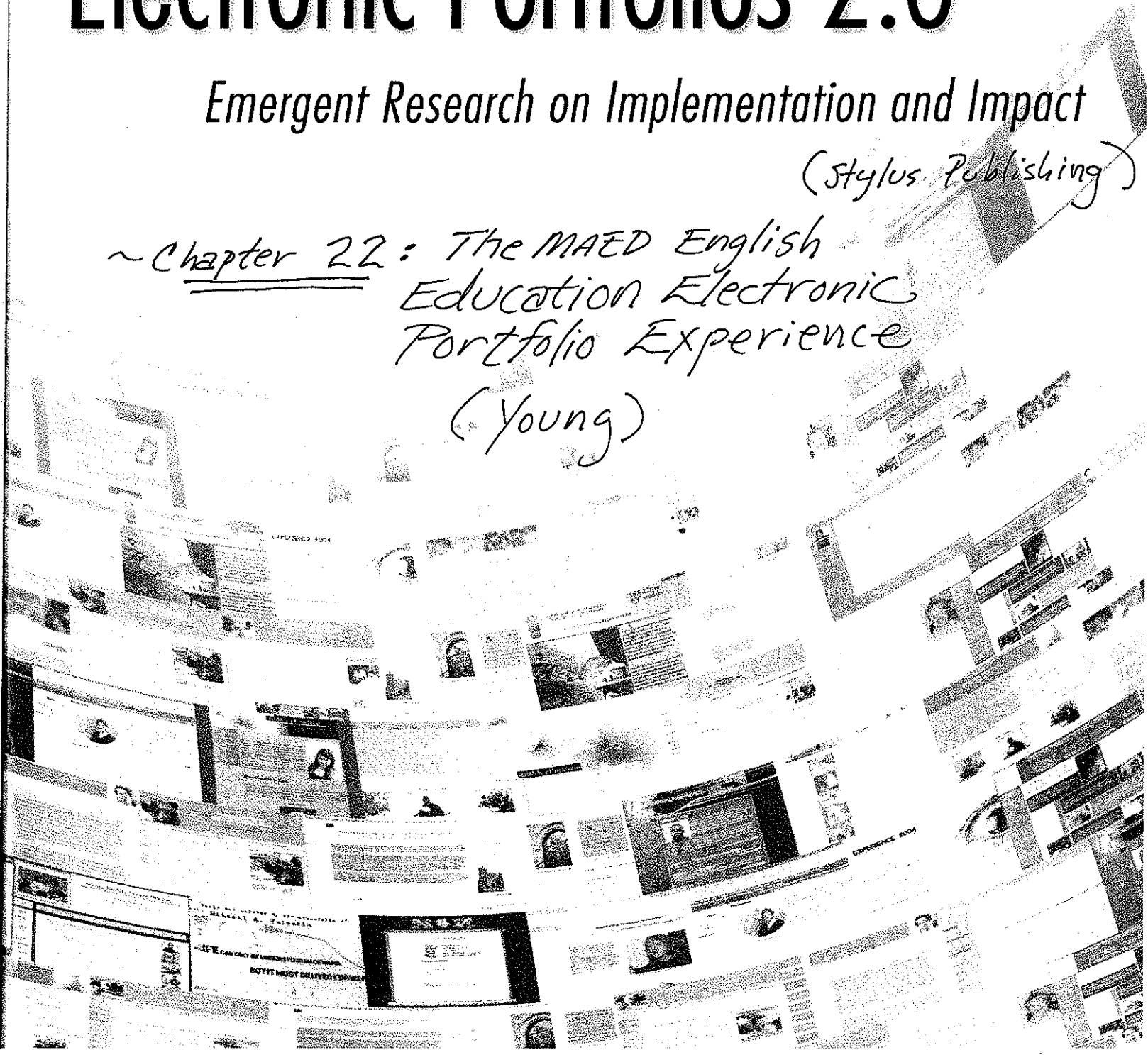
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~ Chapter 22: *The MAED English
Education Electronic
Portfolio Experience
(Young)*



THE MAED ENGLISH EDUCATION ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO EXPERIENCE

*What Preservice English Teachers Have to
Teach Us About EPs and Reflection*

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My research focuses on English education students' perceptions of and experiences with the MAED English Education Electronic Portfolio requirement at Virginia Tech, where I served as assistant professor from 2001 to 2006 and as program advisor from 2004 to 2006. Candidates in the Teacher Education in the Sciences and Humanities (TESH) MAED Program create an electronic portfolio as their culminating project prior to graduation. The purpose of the portfolio is for students to reflect critically upon their experiences in the program and in the field, as well as to demonstrate their pedagogical ability, their knowledge of their content area, and their completion of all program requirements and related standards. Requirements include standards from the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), as well as standards from content area professional organizations (i.e., National Council of Teachers of English).

Students begin work on the portfolio in the fall semester and complete it in the spring semester of

a 15- to 18-month graduate program. At the end of the spring semester, following student teaching, students present their portfolios to their cohort and to a panel of at least three evaluators, which typically includes the program advisor, an additional program faculty, and the university supervisor. Ultimately, students are evaluated on their ability not only to choose multiple strong artifacts that meet each standard but also to reflect critically about how these evidentiary texts meet the standards.

Throughout their program, students are encouraged and required to reflect critically upon their coursework and upon their experiences in the field. For example, my English education students completed an extensive course- and self-evaluation reflection for their initial methods class. In addition, most major assignments for the course included reflective self-evaluation components. Students also maintained an online reflective field journal for their early field and student teaching internships. Here, they posted entries regularly and replied to peers' postings; it is an interactive and collaborative reflective endeavor. They also kept individual print reflection field logs. Although the electronic portfolio

itself became a public artifact, at least for their peers and the evaluation committee, there were many opportunities for individual reflection as well. In addition, English education students always received detailed responses to their work and self-evaluations. The electronic portfolio was evaluated using a rubric encompassing all of the required standards. Over time, the portfolio came to represent reflection that was both verbal and visual.

RESEARCH MOTIVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

When I began as a faculty member in the TESH program, I observed that the electronic portfolio requirement was an artificial experience for most students. Rather than an authentic representation and reflection of who students were as beginning teachers and what they knew, the portfolio process was a race to fulfill an external requirement for finishing the program, earning the degree, and receiving licensure—not the kind of technology preparation or practice called for by leaders in the field (Pope & Golub, 2000; Young & Bush, 2004). The 10 INTASC principles became the typical framework for students' portfolio design—10 standards links with a few artifacts and reflections—with little consideration for visual or thematic design representing student identity. Even the reflections were minimal in depth, typically just describing the artifact rather than delving into the teaching context and learning experience associated with it. As a result, most of the portfolios were very similar in design, lacking a sense of personal and professional identity, authenticity, and depth. Drawing on my knowledge of portfolio practice and theory (Calfee & Freedman, 1996; Elbow, 1991; Elbow & Belanoff, 1991, 1997; Yancey, 1992, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997), as well as my own experience as a writer and teacher of writing, I believed that my students should and could be getting much more from this experience. Although I understood the need to meet NCATE standards and maintain NCATE accreditation, I also saw the potential for the electronic portfolio experience to be more than a rote INTASC "evidence dump."

As a result of this motivating discontent, I conducted evaluation research on the MAED English Education Electronic Portfolio experience—which served in lieu of a thesis or an exam—over a 5-year period. I was interested in determining how effective the current electronic portfolio requirement was as a culminating reflective component for the program, as well as how the electronic portfolio experience affected student development as a beginning teacher—in terms of both preparation and practice. My questions included the following:

- What are English education students' perceptions of the MAED Licensure Program Electronic Portfolio experience? What effect does their experience have on their preparation as teachers and their practice in the field?
- How are their technology skills, abilities, confidence levels, and so forth affected by the electronic portfolio experience?
- To what extent does their portfolio experience affect their interest, desire, and ability to integrate technology into their teaching, and the probability of their integrating technology into their own teaching in the classroom as a preservice teacher and as a beginning teacher?
- To what extent does the electronic portfolio experience affect their identity as a teacher? To what extent does the electronic portfolio experience facilitate reflection? For example, does it foster identity as a reflective practitioner?

Methodology for the project featured a mixed-methods approach, including the following strategies: case studies, informal interviews and observations, surveys and survey data analysis, and artifact analysis. The next section highlights preliminary results from my research.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data were coded and analyzed using Erickson's analytic induction method (1986), resulting in the following general assertions:

1. The MAED English Education Electronic Portfolio experience does affect student identity by helping students define themselves more explicitly as beginning English teachers.
2. More explicit coaching toward incorporating an identity-based focus in terms of design has improved the quality of students' electronic portfolios, specifically in improving students' ability to situate themselves within the profession with regard to beliefs, philosophy of teaching and learning, knowledge of the field, and teaching practice.
3. More explicit coaching toward developing critical consciousness and critical reflection has improved the quality of students' electronic portfolios, in this case in assisting them to develop the ability to look and look again, to move beyond surface descriptions of artifacts and experiences to critical reflections representing their abilities as reflective practitioners who are able to use higher-level thinking skills, to critique experiences, and to pose informed ideas for change, revision, and improvement.
4. Providing students with multiple opportunities to revisit a particular item for reflection, to revise an initial reflection at various points over the course of the program, facilitates much more explicit and critical reflection.

EVIDENCE FOR FINDINGS

The key piece of evidence for my research findings has been the design evolution of students' electronic portfolios, especially in making the transition from standards-driven design (i.e., 10 INTASC principles as outer links) to design supported by standards. In the second version, students developed their own categories that served as links for the outer layer of their portfolio as well as a visual design and theme reflecting who they are personally and professionally. For example, Kelly's portfolio, one of the early models, illustrates well the typical layout from students: little consideration is given to theme or visual design; it is impersonal in tenor other than the brief greeting and links to her philosophy and resume; and it is organized through links dominated by INTASC standards. Although clean and efficient in design, it is also generic (see Figure 22.1).

However, because Kelly's artifacts and related reflections were rated as stellar, her portfolio was considered a model at the time. To her credit, Kelly achieved this level with very little support or scaffolding from program faculty.

Atypical of this time period is Sara Beth's portfolio, which features an opening page with a striking black-and-white photograph of adult hands cradling a tiny baby's feet accompanied by the following quotation from Thomas Henry Huxley:

Figure 22.1

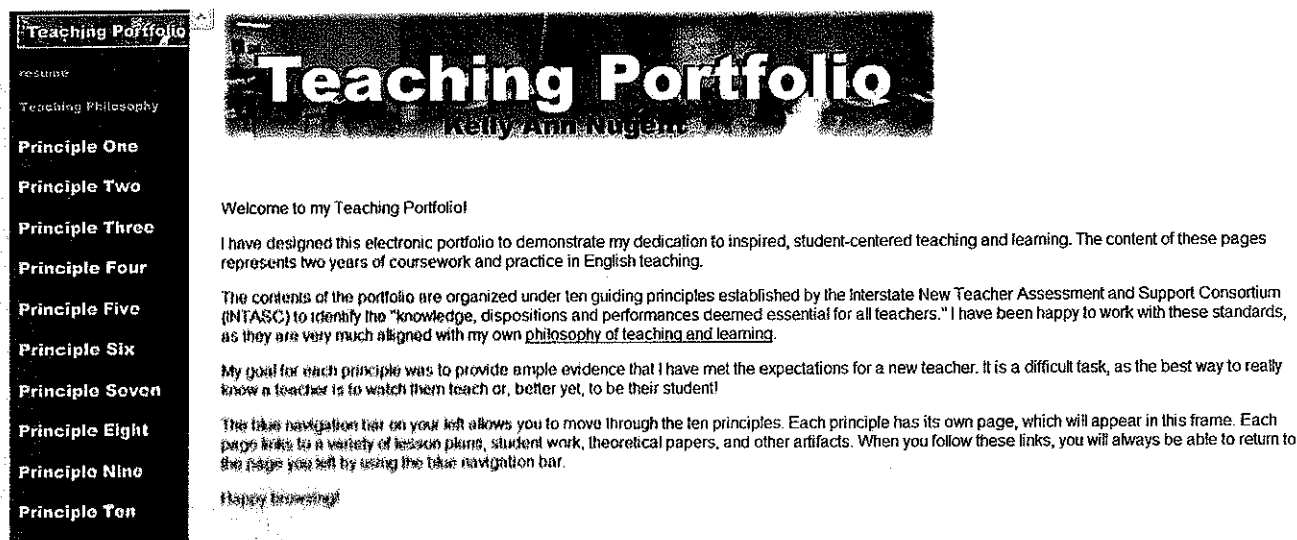
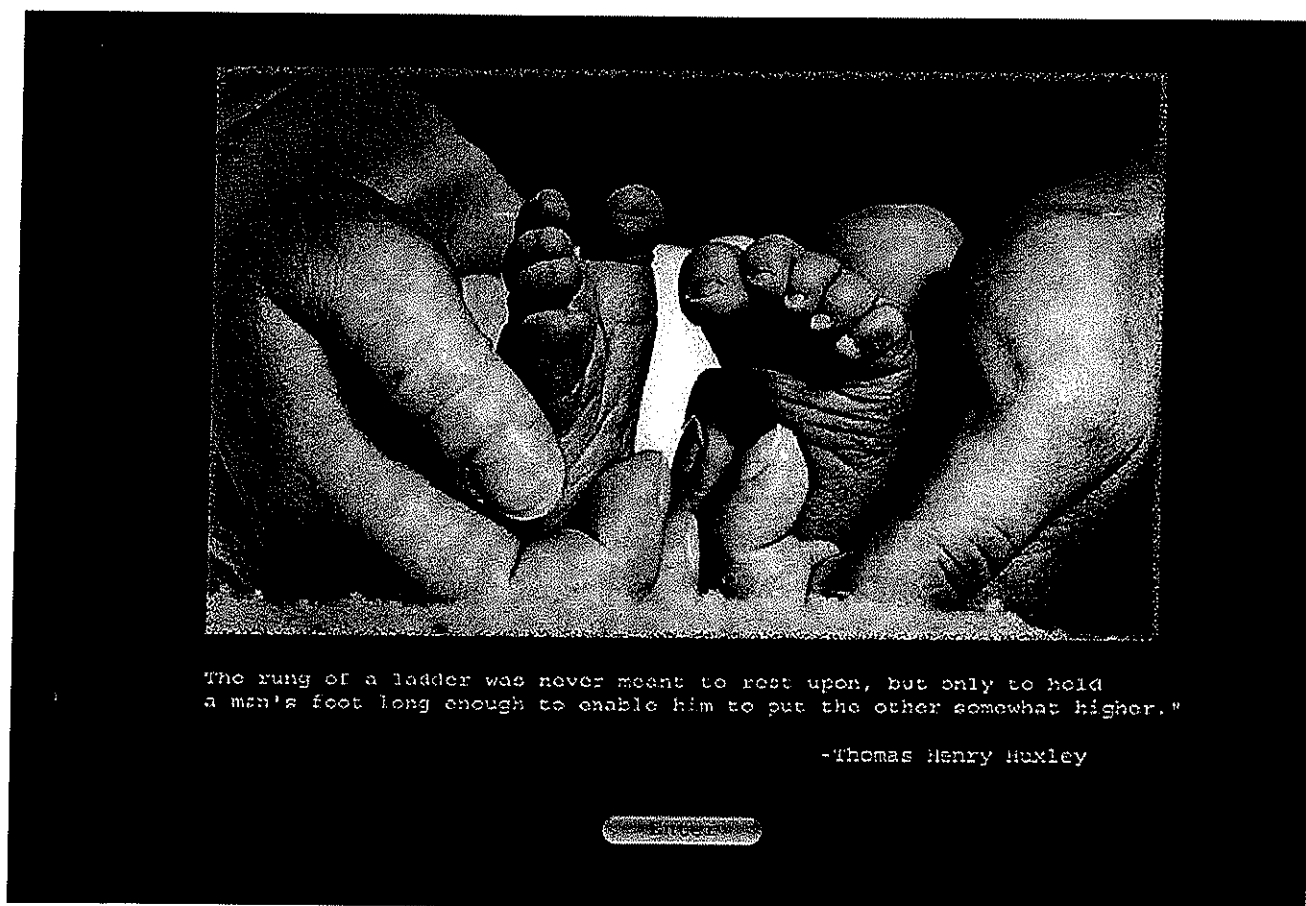


Figure 22.2



"The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man's foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher" (see Figure 22.2).

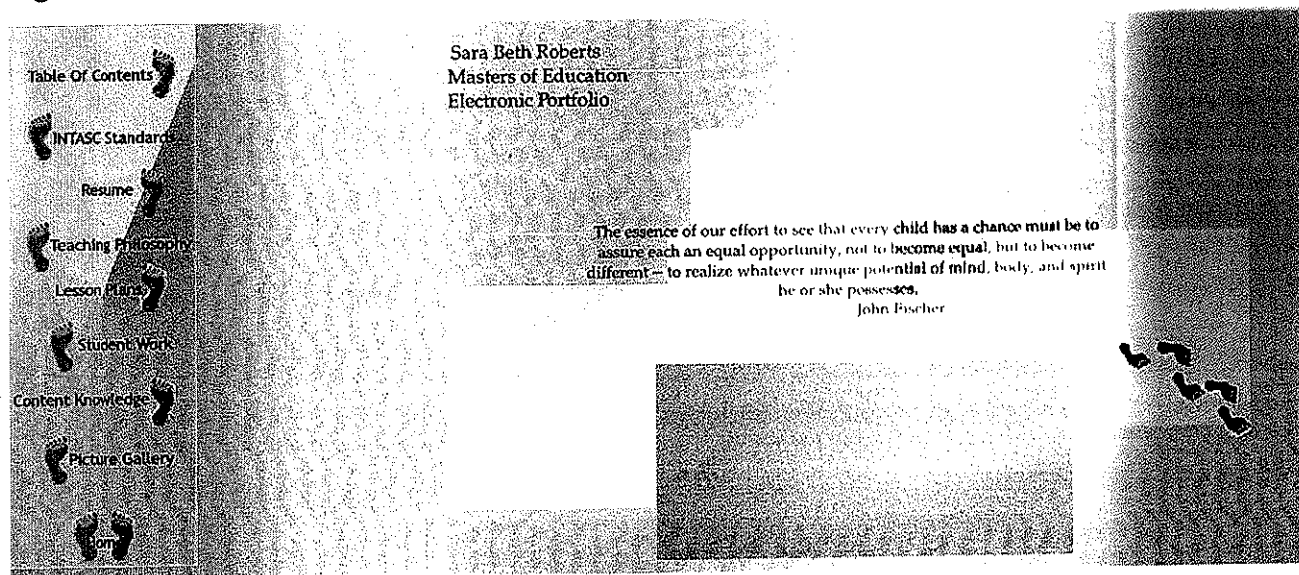
The home page then continues the theme established on the opening page with images of footprints and geometric blocks, indicating a journey and challenges to overcome (see Figure 22.3). Another quotation builds on the first and asserts the teacher's role of helping each student to find his or her individual strengths and gifts rather than creating a path where they all become similar or equal in their similarity. Likewise, Sara Beth has a variety of links—only one of which focuses on INTASC standards.

Her opening page and home page both demonstrate an implicit reflective element through the visual images and quotations she has chosen and the thematic design they represent. Put differently, she creates a visual thread that weaves throughout the portfolio and holds it together. These two portfo-

lios became models for me to use in discussing how to work toward in-depth reflection as well as how to create a meaningful design.

This evolution from a more generic design to a more thoughtful one has continued to become more prevalent and is evident in the portfolios of later students such as Sara (<http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios/liles/Electronic%20Portfolio/Electronic%20Portfolio/home.html>), Jonathan (<http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios/duty/Home%20Page.htm>), and Katie (<http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios/walters/homeintro/index.html>) and the rest of her 2005–6 cohort (<http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios.html>). Both Sara's and Jonathan's portfolios represent the transition to a visual and thematic design highlighting professional identity. Sara includes images of trees, tree branches, and leaves throughout her portfolio, indicating her growth as a beginning English teacher,

Figure 22.3



as well as her philosophy that learning is an ongoing process, one that continues as a teacher (see Figures 22.4 and 22.5).

Jonathan's design includes a blueprint as the background for his menu of links (see Figure 22.6).

He even provides an explicit explanation of his thematic design—"under construction"—which is the way he characterizes his quest to become an English teacher. Katie and the rest of her cohort's portfolios represent this transition, but they also take it one step further.

Figure 22.4

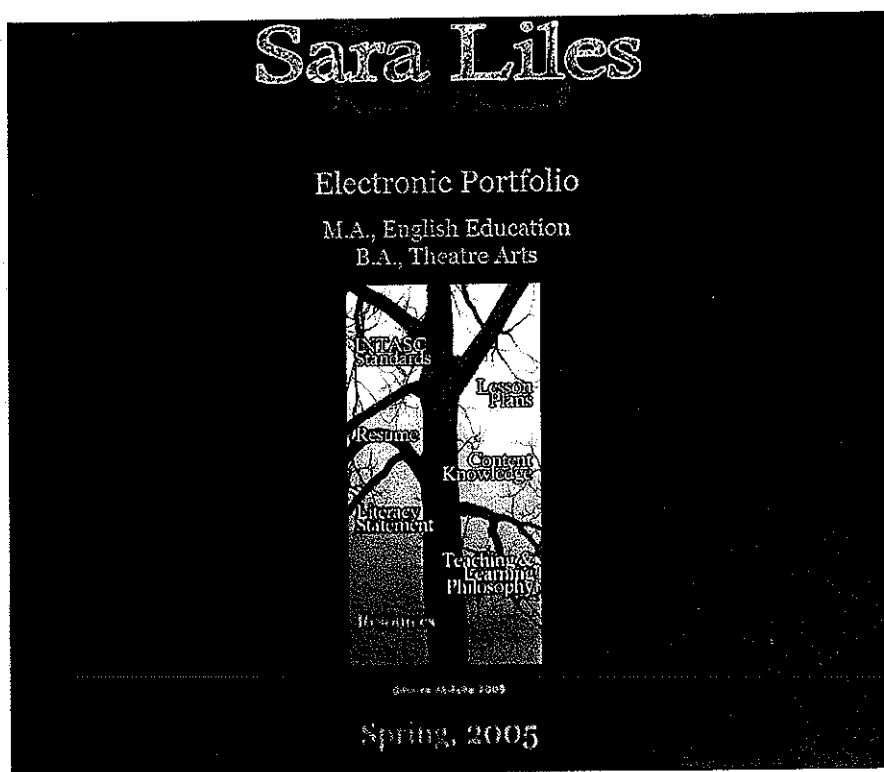
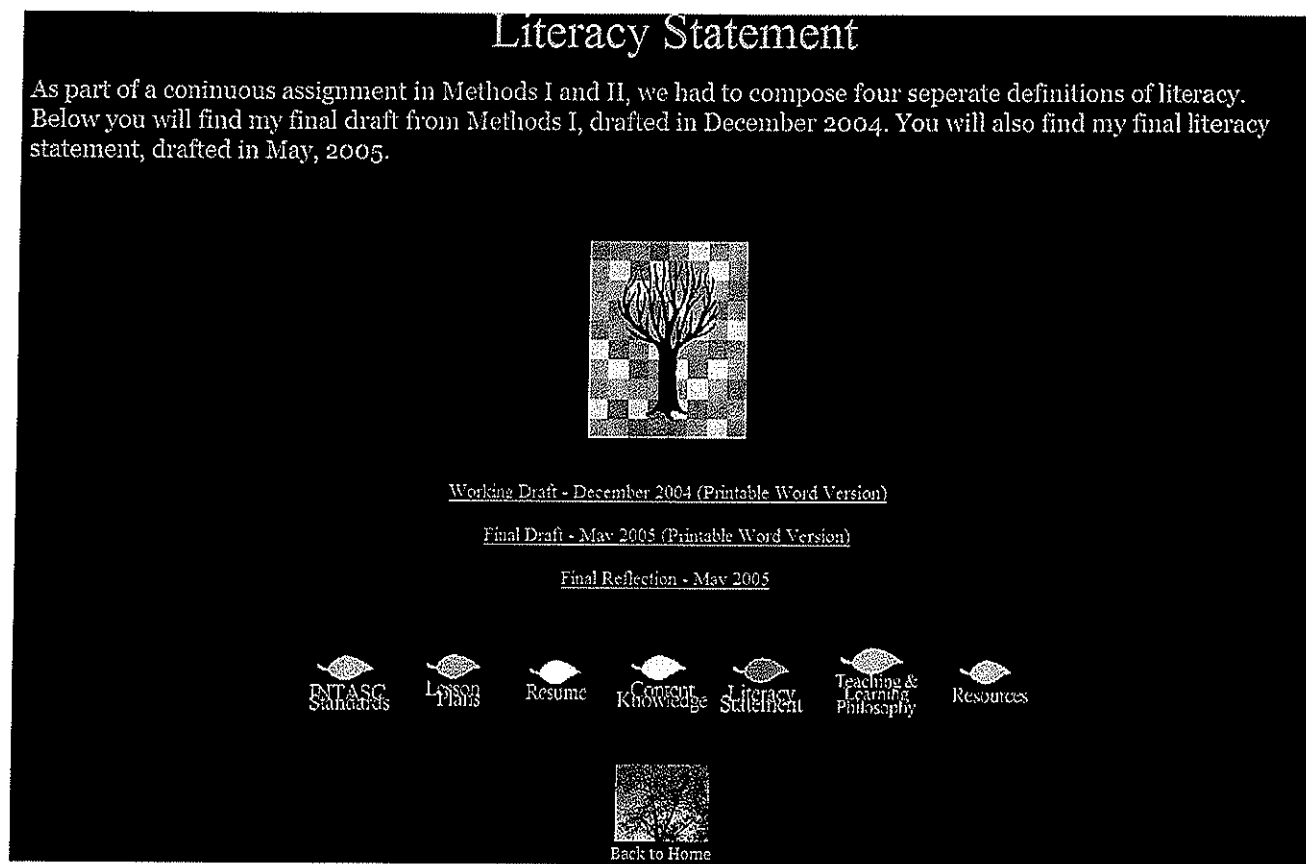


Figure 22.5



Katie includes an opening page with an image of a flower opening at the end of a tree branch with a related quotation from Mark Twain superimposed: "Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is" (see Figure 22.7).

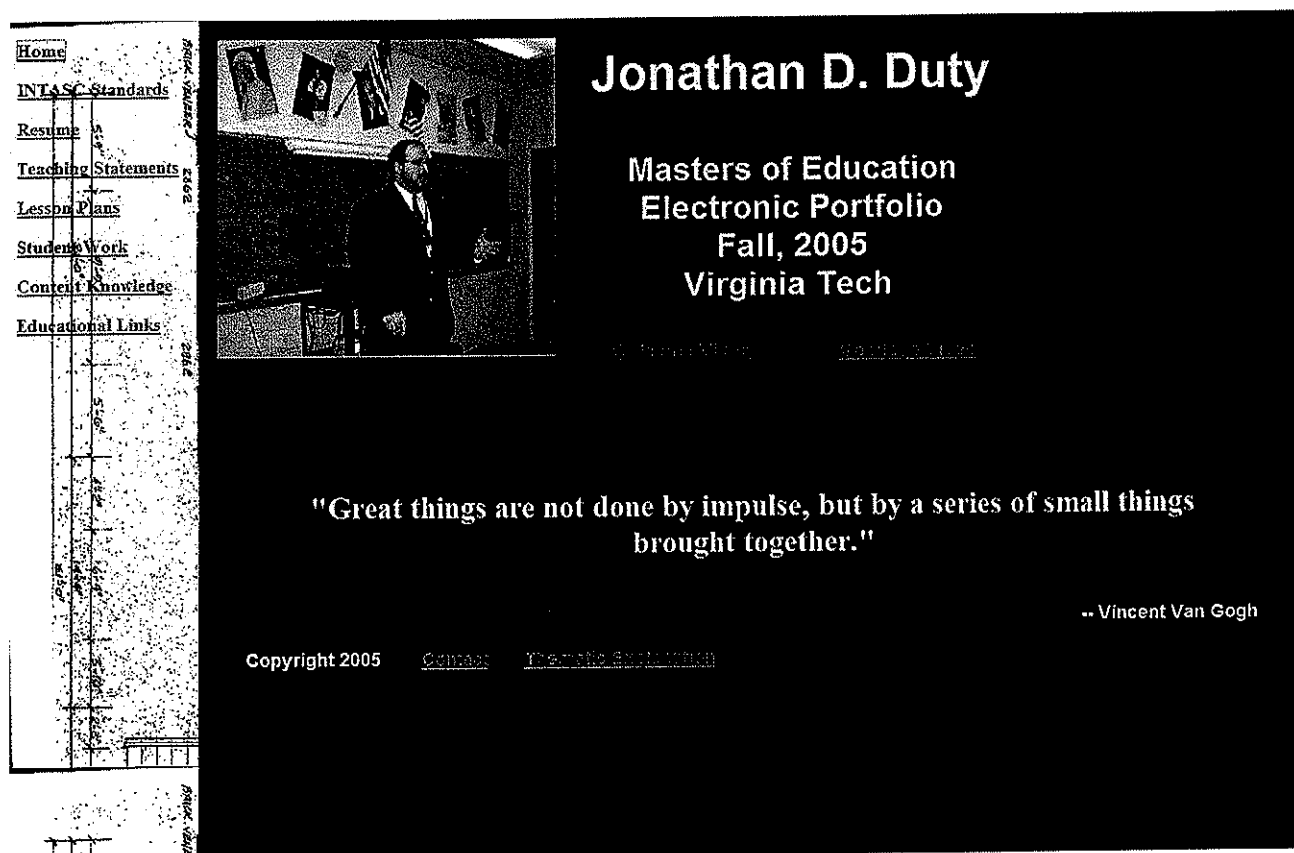
She maintains this theme throughout her portfolio with similar images of seeds, plants, and nurturing and with her insightful reflections about the necessity of taking risks as a teacher and the benefits of being insightful and learning from one's teaching experiences. Unlike past students' portfolios, her organization is neither standardized nor keyed to the INTASC standards. Katie's eportfolio, like those of the rest of the 2005–6 cohort (eight students), includes individualized categories demonstrating how students use artifacts, reflections, and standards to highlight character traits they feel best represent who they are as beginning teachers of the English language arts. For Katie, these characteristics include literacy, knowledge, community, leader-

ship, and technology, and each link includes detailed explanations addressing context, application, artifacts, and reflection (see Figure 22.8).

Appendix A includes a list indicating students' initial ideas for categories; overall, their choices for categories reflected well the characteristics they felt were most important in establishing their identity and competence as beginning teachers of English language arts. Moreover, their choices for categories easily allowed them to embed all the necessary standards requirements *within* the portfolio in a much more integrated and natural way. Through this design evolution over the 5 years, student portfolios have progressed to include a much stronger sense of personal and professional identity, authenticity, and ownership, as well as depth in terms of critical reflection.

Another key piece of evidence warranting these assertions includes the students' narrative reflections describing their MAED English Education Portfolio.

Figure 22.6



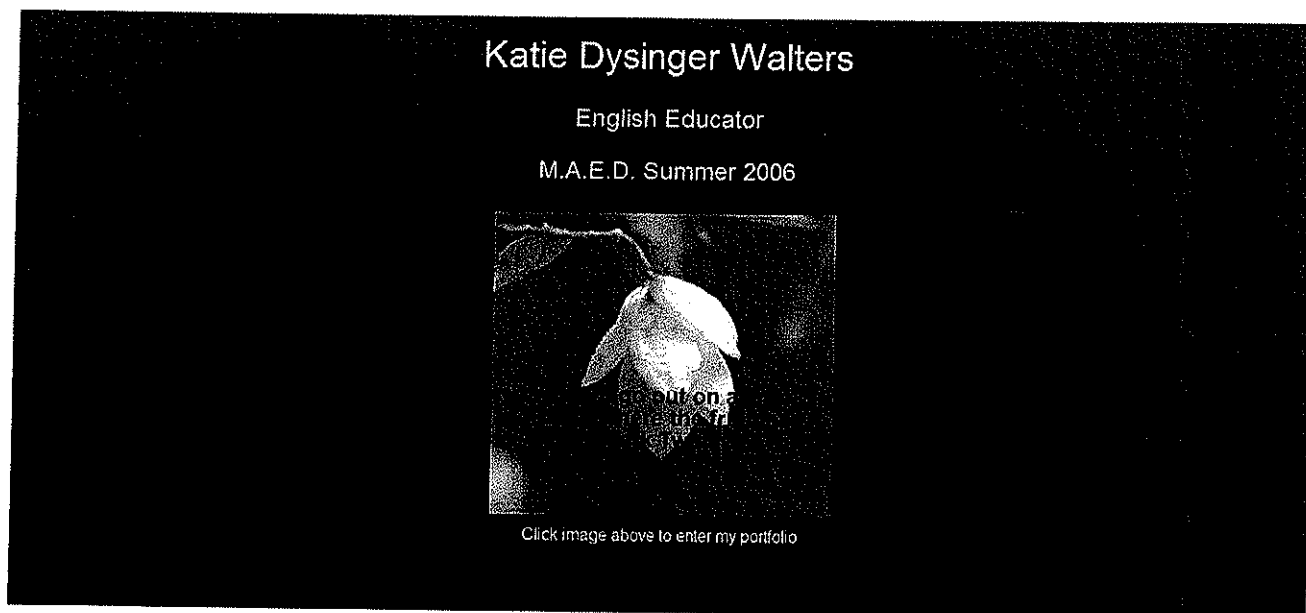
lio experience composed *after* the completion of the portfolio presentations. One major finding from these documents is the extent to which students have come to understand how much the electronic portfolio serves as a tool for critical reflection. The following two excerpts from selected reflections address this realization specifically:

- I believe my EP as a whole serves as a tool for reflection. I believe this for a number of reasons. First, I believe the theme of my EP speaks towards reflection. I know that I am not an outstanding and or veteran English teacher (yet ☺); therefore, it was important for me to understand where I was coming from as a future English Educator. I have been built from the ground-up when it comes to teaching English; therefore, I found it necessary to choose the theme "under construction" for my EP. I also believe

my EP serves as a tool for reflection because it shows all of the decisions I have made as a pre-service English Educator. When I look at my EP, I see decisions that I have made that I agree with and decisions that I have made that I would change if faced with the same situations again. With this in mind, I believe my EP serves as an ever-lasting tool of reflection for now and for years to come. (Jonathan, December 2005; note: he graduated fall 2005 and was actually in the 2004–5 cohort, but he presented to the 2005–6 cohort.)

- The portfolio served as a way for me to channel my reflective efforts throughout the program. By zeroing in on specific artifacts, I was able to paint a picture of the entire year and reflect on specific moments through the artifacts. It was as if I was making an organized collage, or a time line. As I went along the

Figure 22.7



timeline, I was able to further examine my own examinations of artifacts, and see why I made the decisions I did. (Todd, May 2006)

In terms of a more implicit and, perhaps, more compelling result of the electronic portfolio experience, Katie (May 2006) responded as such:

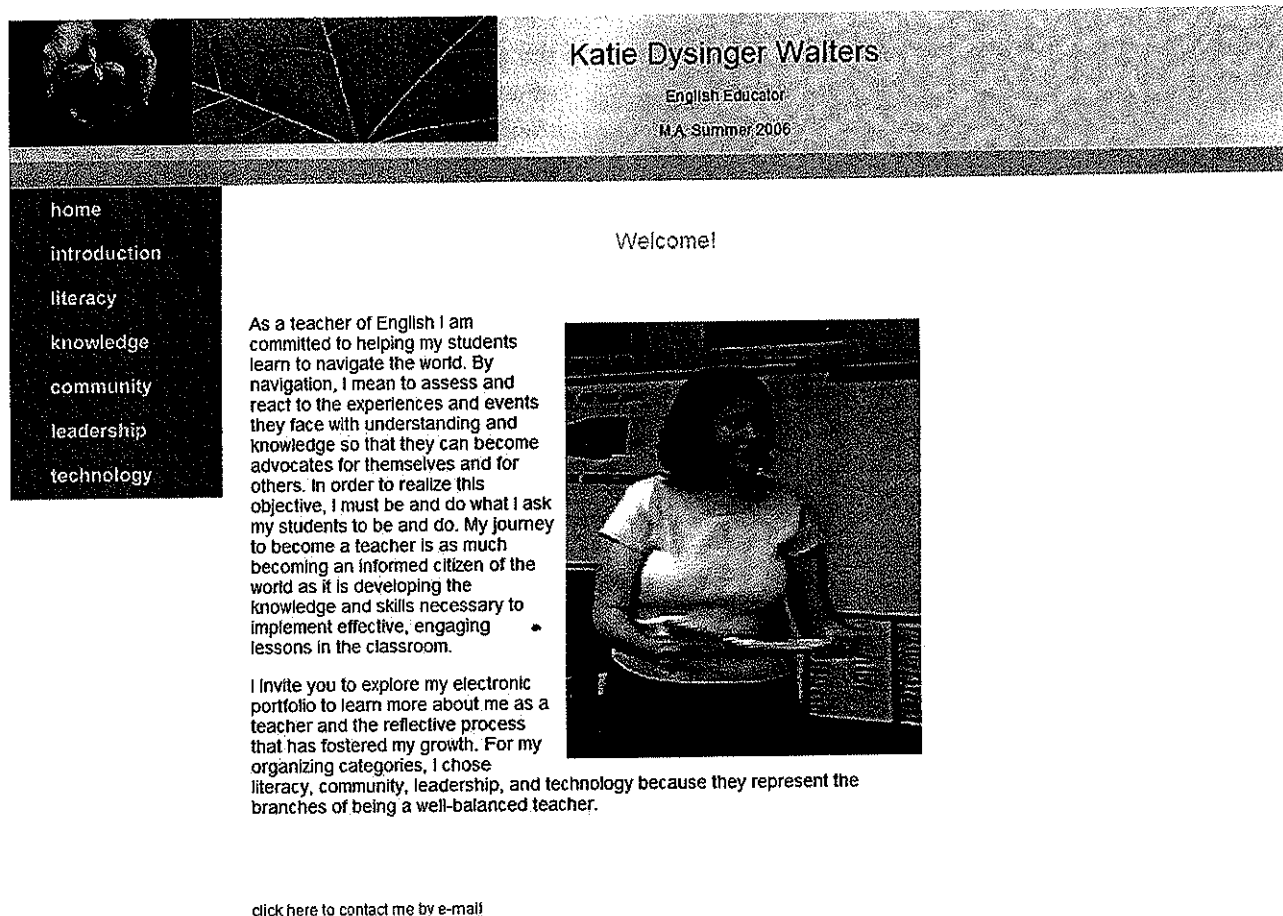
- Being a reflective practitioner means thinking critically and deeply on the many processes of teaching. It means considering a day's lesson plan and asking myself what went well, what didn't go well and how can I fix it. It means thinking about how you relate to students as a group and individually and what is in individual histories that inform and direct those relationships. It means identifying a problem, its possible sources and potential solutions. It means actively seeking and experimenting with solutions to problems you face as a teacher and continually examining the effect it has on my practice. As such, reflection will be the most important factor in my growth as a teacher. Without it, I will not change my practices or my underlying beliefs.

Collectively, these students' responses demon-

strate the potential the MAED English Education Electronic Portfolio experience has for fostering, facilitating, and enhancing the potential for deep, critical thinking and reflection about teaching and learning. Time was a critical factor as well, with students commenting both on the immediate effect of the electronic portfolio experience in assisting these students in processing their graduate program and accompanying field experiences and on its influence in their ability to define themselves as future teachers and leaders modeling similar practices for their students. Not least, the 2005–6 cohort has shown evidence of extraordinary professional commitment. Despite our being spread across the state of Virginia and now into North Carolina, in the fall of 2005, cohort members presented with me at the Virginia Association of Teachers of English Fall Conference on multigenre reading and writing; in the fall of 2006, at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Conference in Nashville on media literacy; and in the fall of 2007, at NCTE in New York City on the MAED English Education Electronic Portfolio experience.

Ultimately, my experience over the last 5 years has reinforced the importance of critical reflection for my own practice. I trusted my instincts about problems I saw with a portfolio requirement that

Figure 22.8



was decontextualized, unauthentic, and too focused on external factors. I also learned not to take reflection for granted, that it is indeed a skill that can and must be developed over time with careful consideration for providing models and scaffolds. Appendix A represents part of my evolution in working with students on electronic portfolio design and the scaffolding that can inform that process. As Beers (2003) poignantly revealed about reading—that we cannot expect kids to “just do it”—I know the same is true for reflection. For me, the 2005–6 cohort represents the tipping point not only in terms of a much higher-quality MAED English Education Portfolio experience but also in terms of the greater potential electronic portfolios have for enhancing teacher education and producing much more confident and competent reflective practition-

ers who have a coherent vision for teaching now and on into the future.

Although my experience is context specific, there are implications and lessons that I believe would benefit others who are facilitating similar electronic portfolio programs at other institutions and in other programs:

- Like any good educational reform or instructional method, electronic portfolios take time and preparation. Faculty and students must be provided with the proper support, training, and resources, including hardware, software, and access.
- Electronic portfolios have the potential to provide preservice English teachers with the valuable and necessary experience of manipulating and integrating technology for an

authentic purpose—namely to demonstrate content and pedagogical knowledge and ability, but also to shape one's identity as a beginning teacher and reflective practitioner (see also Young & Figgins, 2002).

- Although various professional standards can be the source for requiring an electronic portfolio system or program, they do not have to limit the design, purpose, or content of the portfolio. Instead, they can be used to support portfolio content, design, and reflection. When students have the opportunity and resources to create a more authentic electronic portfolio, one involving choice, empowerment, and flexibility, they will be more motivated to create and complete a compelling product.
- Providing models and examples and discussions about these models, and including the explicit expectations for the eportfolios, is also necessary. Models should include both content and design features.
- Multimodal and visual literacies can be key components of electronic portfolio design and, as such, can provide compelling insights that go beyond print to demonstrate in dynamic ways how beginning teachers view themselves and convey their professional identities to others.
- Well-chosen artifacts and critical reflection should be the cornerstones of an effective electronic portfolio. Reflection can and should be taught and modeled explicitly as a scaffolded process.
- The directions for reflecting on artifacts are part of the scaffolding process. I required reflective annotations in which students completed three tasks: (a) name and describe the artifact; (b) provide a description of the explicit context associated with the artifact; and (c) provide a critical and insightful *reflection* that demonstrates clearly how this particular artifact (and, if applicable, all of its parts) meets the particular standard for which you have assigned it. I explained that the crucial third step should demonstrate their thoughtful consideration and abilities as reflective practitioners.

- Another strategy for helping students develop the skill of reflection is for them to reflect on the same item multiple times over the course of a semester, year, or program. Two assignments directly connected to disciplinary and professional practice were required artifacts for all: a literacy statement/definition and a technology statement/definition. Students completed versions of their statements/definitions at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of their program experience; in other words, reiteration was built into the model of reflective practice. Each time, students reflected upon the previous version as well as drew upon new material introduced into their methods courses as a means of crafting a more detailed and informed statement/definition. In a final reflection they compared the various versions and described the experience. For examples, see versions of Sara's literacy statement and her final reflection at <http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios/liles/Electronic%20Portfolio/Electronic%20Portfolio/litstatement.html> and versions of Katie's literacy statement and final reflection at http://www.soe.vt.edu/englished/portfolios/walters/cat/lit/lit_mpq.html
- Electronic portfolios are multimedia experiences and, as such, should be shared, demonstrated, and discussed with audiences appropriate for their purpose and focus.

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